

**TESTIMONY OF BRYAN J. BURHANS
NATIONAL WILD TURKEY FEDERATION**

BEFORE THE:

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE,**

CONCERNING:

SUPPORT OF THE FOREST LAND ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

**July 20, 2004
WASHINGTON, DC**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is Bryan Burhans and I am the Director of Land Management Programs for Conservation Programs for the National Wild Turkey Federation. I am a professional wildlife biologist with expertise in the management of wild turkeys and other wildlife on both public and private lands in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

We appreciate the opportunity to address you on what we believe is a critical program affecting private forestlands across the country – the Forest Land Enhancement Program.

The National Wild Turkey Federation strongly supports restored funding of FLEP. Frankly Mr. Chairman, we share your frustration that we are fighting for funding when this program was duly passed by this Committee and the Congress, AND fully funded.

Active Forest Management Promotes Diversity

Wild turkeys benefit from active forest management that involves appropriate timber harvest, thinning, timber stand improvement cuts, prescribed burning, appropriate application of herbicides, and other tools used by landowners. A managed forest provides far superior habitat for the wild turkey, and most other species of wildlife, as compared to an unmanaged forest. From the Black Hills of South Dakota to the oak forests of Kentucky to the pine-dominated coastal plain of Virginia, private landowners that properly manage their forest provide improved habitat for wild turkeys and many other species of wildlife.

Popular practices such as planting trees and shrubs that produce abundant food sources and creating wildlife openings are important, but these practices cannot replace the importance of comprehensive forest management.

FLEP – A Missed Partnership Opportunity?

The Forest Land Enhancement Program was designed to “establish, restore, protect, manage, maintain, and enhance the health and productivity of the non-industrial private forestlands in the United States for timber, habitat for flora and fauna, soil, water, and air quality, wetlands and riparian buffers to help meet future public demand for forest resources and provide environmental benefits (US Forest Service document).” This program provides a great opportunity for state forestry agencies to further partner with groups like the National Wild Turkey Federation to help enhance delivery and implementation of this vital program. FLEP provides a great opportunity to stretch existing federal funds through partnerships.

For example, on average the southeastern states planned on allocating 10% of funds towards outreach and education. If FLEP is funded as authorized, this could provide \$2 million for education and information purposes. If just 25% of this funding is used for landowner outreach, and NGOs, like the NWTF, add an additional 25% to the pool of funding, over 6,000 landowners owning an estimated 1.5 million acres of private land could be educated in one year. We are missing an opportunity to sell conservation to the very people we depend on to provide us with clean water, clean air, a secure forest products base, and abundant and diverse wildlife populations.

The NWTF has offered funding and staff to help agencies deliver these outreach programs. Currently, we are partnering with state forestry agencies in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York, North Carolina, South Dakota, Louisiana, and Nebraska, just to name a few. By pooling funding and staff between the state agencies and the NWTF, together we have delivered land management outreach to hundreds of landowners and natural resource professionals. The Forest Land Enhancement Program offered a dramatic opportunity to increase partnership opportunities and reach more private landowners.

In Georgia alone, in partnership with the Georgia Forestry Commission, we have hosted over 15 landowner workshops over the last several years. This partnership has allowed us to impact well over a quarter million acres of private land in Georgia. Without the combined funding through this partnership, this effort would not be possible. With restored FLEP funding, even more partnership opportunities like this would be possible in Georgia.

FLEP Complements the Forest Stewardship Program

One of the great attributes of FLEP was its ability to complement the state forestry agencies' existing Forest Stewardship Program. FLEP offered a unique opportunity to enhance the in-demand technical assistance offered by the agencies, and focus funds towards a much-needed tool - financial assistance.

Landowners implement conservation practices for a variety of reasons. Financial assistance is a time-proven tool to encourage landowners to initiate conservation and management practices that they would otherwise not implement. For example, many private forests in the Southeast are in need of pre-commercial thinning and mid-story hardwood control to recapture a pine-savanna plant community. This plant community is beneficial for many species, including the wild turkey, red cockaded woodpecker, and bobwhite quail. Financial assistance is needed by some landowners to encourage them to implement these needed projects. The result is improved wildlife habitat, improved water quality and a higher quality forest products supply.

The Southeast is not the only region with this need. The northeastern forests face many challenges: loss of the oak component, low-value forests from past high-grading practices, and insect damage. FLEP provides a vehicle to help landowners deal with these challenges that other cost-share opportunities do not - and FLEP accomplishes many tasks that other Farm Bill programs can not accomplish.

Case Study – The Black Hills of South Dakota

The Black Hills of South Dakota is a prime illustration of the effectiveness of financial assistance using FLEP funding, and demonstrates the current demand for FLEP in the region. According to Chad Lehman, regional wildlife biologist with the NWTF, “FLEP has the potential to have the most impact to enhance wildlife habitat compared to existing state and federal programs, and also protect forests from dangerous wildfires.” Lehman and foresters with the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry, are currently working with 20 landowners in the Black Hills through previous FLEP allocations impacting over 10,000 acres of private lands.

Of critical importance is the fact that over 100 landowners are currently on a waiting list for FLEP funding in this area. Without continued funding through FLEP, it is unlikely the work will be completed. Their current work includes removing tree tops and hazardous fuels to reduce fire hazards and enhance wild turkey brood habitat.

The Black Hills example also illustrates the impact the FLEP program can have on the local economy. Based on economic research by Lehman and others (e.g., see Southwick Associates, Inc, 2003), Lehman estimates that turkey hunters spend over \$7 million annually hunting the wild turkey in South Dakota. Lehman estimates that turkey hunters spend over \$2.5 million just in the Black Hills region. Better habitat equates to better turkey hunting and more turkey hunters fueling the local economy. It is important to keep our private forestlands as sustainable working forests. When these forests are consumed by wildfire, no one benefits.

Case Study – Wisconsin

According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (N. Potvin, personal communications) all of the previous FLEP allocations have been utilized for on-the-ground management. The practices used in the state directly impact the wild turkey resource and a wide array of other wildlife. Oak is the dominant (preferred) forest type in the state. The state, working with private forest landowners, have used FLEP funding to conduct timber stand improvement cuts, and control invasive plant species that negatively impact forest resources. Of high concern in the state is the loss of the oak component in the forest. This is an important concern to wild turkey hunters – oak mast is an important food source for wild turkeys and many other species of wildlife. The state’s work using FLEP funding is helping to reverse the trend of oak-dominated forests converting to soft hardwood forests.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this program was authorized and fully funded. I urge you to fight for the release of funds that will guarantee better forest health. Thank you.